

# A forgotten adivasi landscape: Museums and memory in western India

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*This article focuses on processes of remembering, forgetting and re-remembering. It examines a fundamental tension between the project of retrieving an adivasi past, initiated by an adivasi museum in rural western India, and the social and material landscape surrounding it, characterised instead by fragmentation and separation from the identity of adivasi. The article reflects on a collaborative research project between the researcher, young adivasi curators and inhabitants of the area adjoining the museum. It shows how, while curators engaged in a project of recuperation, at the same time, they were distancing themselves from their traditional identity by joining reform movements and new religious sects. Processes of memory and forgetting, however, also co-existed. People held multiple identities and the process of retrieving the past also called for transformation and reform. The article is a timely contribution to debates about adivasi identity, social transformation and religious reform. It also offers a reflection on the new role of indigenous museums and their potential to address a 'crisis of postcolonial memory' (Werbner 1998). Finally, it contributes to discussions of methodology with a focus on the collaborative process of collecting and its role in eliciting or preventing certain kinds of memories.*

**Keywords:** adivasi, museums, memory, forgetting, religious reform

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## I

*Introduction*

The Koraj hill is a forested and rocky formation, imposing not for its modest height but for its sudden appearance out of a flat landscape. It falls in the district of Chhota Udaipur, which is classified as a scheduled tribe (ST) area by the Government of India and whose population comprises a mixture of adivasi groups (including Rathvas, Bhils and Nayaks), Hindu and Muslim communities. Here, hidden in caves and beyond thick and inhospitable bushes are rock paintings, ruins of old fortifications and sites of worship that belong to these different communities and testify to their historical co-presence in the area. For travellers who make their way eastward, it is one of the first hills before the plains give rise to the dry and rugged terrain that characterises the regional border between Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh in western India. At the foothills of Koraj are two villages. There is also a wide low lying building made of red bricks and built according to ‘tribal style’, which differs from the traditional mud houses that surround it. It is the site of *Vaacha: Museum of Voice*, a part of the Adivasi Academy located in Tejgadh, Gujarat, and is an educational experiment set up in 1996 under the impetus of the literary scholar and social thinker Ganesh Devy.

This article explores the relationship between memory, forgetting and re-remembering. It reflects on a collaborative research project between young adivasi curators, inhabitants of the area surrounding the museum and myself. The project aimed to document the Koraj hill, with a focus on rock paintings, place names, sacred sites and memories relating to the landscape. This was intended as a way to create a knowledge repository in the museum for future generations to know about their origins. The article unravels a fundamental tension between the project of retrieving an adivasi past initiated by *Vaacha* and the social and material landscape outside the museum, characterised instead by fragmentation and

separation from the identity of adivasi. It shows how the young curators, while engaged in a process of recuperation, were simultaneously taking part in processes of forgetting. Alongside a large section of their community, they were distancing themselves from traditions associated with being adivasi. They were also embracing new re-formed identities and forms of sociality through association with emerging religious sects. This was a process that involved a social separation from the past and other people, including one's kin. Often, it also called for the erasure of syncretism between adivasis, Rathvas, Hindu, Muslims and other local identities. Processes of memory and forgetting, however, also coexisted. Forgetting was a precondition for projects of memory such as the one initiated by the museum, to the extent that without erasure, there would not have been a need to retrieve. People also held multiple identities and projects of re-evaluation called for transformation and reform. This article is intended as a contribution to current debates about adivasi identity, social transformation and religious reform. It also offers reflections on the potential role of indigenous museums and indigenous curatorship to address processes of marginalisation and forgetting. Finally, it seeks to enliven discussions on methodology by focussing on the collaborative process of collecting the past and how this may elicit or prevent certain kinds of memories.

In the Indian context, 'tribal' is a legal category. Alongside a schedule of depressed castes, the Indian government lists 705 different tribal groups (Scheduled Tribes), amounting to 104 million people or 8.6 per cent of the country's total population.<sup>1</sup> These groups hold special rights and qualify for affirmative action policies such as reservations in jobs and education (Xaxa 2001). Adivasi, which literally means first inhabitants, is a term that was popularised in the 1930s to refer to tribals in the context of anti-colonial rebellions (Rycroft

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://tribal.nic.in/WriteReadData/CMS/Documents/census.pdf>. Accessed on 19 January 2015.

2006).<sup>2</sup> Adivasis have historically been, and continue to be, central to contested projects of modernity, development and nation building. The intensification of resource extraction under neoliberal conditions is continuing a colonial trend of uprooting these communities from their land and livelihoods. Related movements of resistance and Maoist insurgency and the heavy militarisation by the Indian state have turned many adivasi regions into sites of intensifying conflict (Padel and Das 2010; Shah 2010, 2011). Meanwhile, nationalist forces, particularly active in the regional context of Gujarat, are working to integrate adivasis within a supposedly homogenous Hindu nation, thereby denying these communities the possibility of cultural, linguistic and religious difference (Lobo 2002). As exotic primitives, ‘tribals’ continue to find a place in national representations of ‘diversity in unity’.

The historical marginalisation of adivasi groups has not only been economic, but also cultural. Their exclusion from resources and traditional forms of livelihood linked to the forest, for instance, has gone hand-in-hand with the processes of criminalisation and the creation of a ‘negative’ adivasi identity (Mosse 2005: 51; Robinson 1985: 133). Since the colonial period, forest communities’ practices of livelihood and power, whether slash and burn cultivation, the raiding of the plains as a form of tribute (S. Guha 1999: 81; Skaria 1999: 118) or the itinerant professions of bards and performers, have been construed as the basis for ‘underdevelopment’, ‘primitivism’ and ‘criminality’. From being an idiom and resource of power, the forest was transformed into one of subordination through the creation of forest enclosures and the establishment of private property (Sivaramakrishnan 2000). Elders around Korajlonged for a past in which the forest was a place of plenty and intertwined with their cultural and social systems.

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<sup>2</sup>There is a categorical tension between ‘tribal’ and ‘adivasis’, as not all adivasi groups are recognised as tribals and tribals are not recognised as indigenous people by the Indian Government (Baviskar 2005; Béteille 1998).

According to Vaacha's funding trustee Ganesh Devy, adivasis today suffer from a kind of aphasia or loss of speech (Dey 2006: 95), which relates to their historical marginalisation and the devaluation and erasure of their livelihoods and knowledge systems. Skaria talks in similar terms of the 'Bhil malaise' (1999: 254), as a sentiment of powerlessness and inadequacy that accompanied adivasis' entry into modernity. Werbner (1998) broadens this problem to a crisis of postcolonial memory. In the African continent, he shows how colonised countries have had to engage with the past, both as a difficult presence marked on the body and the landscape as well as an absence of kin and social relations, for instance. In this context, Vaacha, which means voice or expression, was established with the aim of generating an adivasi knowledge and vision of the world 'from the tribal point of view'. This is intended as a resource for the future and to encourage the self-reliance of adivasi communities. Young adivasis from the surrounding area work as curators and artists, and as subjects rather than objects of museumisation. The museum's location in a rural and border area of Gujarat at the foothills of Koraj and its ancient remains are paradigmatic of its aims: to speak from and re-evaluate the margins and to bring adivasis' past to bear on the present and the future. At the same time, while located in a village, Vaacha links to wider trans-local networks of artists, indigenous peoples, researchers and funding bodies. It is within this nexus that the museum generates adivasi knowledge.

In India, the radical philosophies of Elwin, Aurobindo, Gandhi and Tagore have provided inspiration for projects such as Vaacha. As I mentioned above, at one level, the histories of adivasis have been characterised by continuing processes of dispossession and their identities treated as objects of improvement. As India's original inhabitants, however, adivasis have also been taken as the positive utopia for a more ethical future. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time of high imperialism and world war, the national

university founded by Tagore at Santiniketan (West Bengal), promoted a cultural nationalism based on pluralism and on the integration of diverse urban, rural and adivasicultural and artistic traditions. The Santhal adivasis, who inhabit the region adjoining the university, became here an ‘open allegory’ that could convey a range of meanings: from a pre-colonial indigeneity to India’s multicultural diversity and a new human condition (Rycroft 2006: 164). Elwin—an anthropologist, missionary and politician who greatly influenced tribal policy in the wake of Independence—promoted the values of an adivasi civilisation. He exalted adivasis’ belief in freedom and equality and the interdependence of their cultural, artistic, economic and political system. Against the unifying tendencies of certain forms of Indian nationalism, he refused to reduce adivasi culture to an ‘inferior’ form of Hinduism and instead promoted its potential to renew India’s civilisation as a whole (Elwin 1951, 1964; Guha 2000; Rousseleau 2009).

More broadly, Vaacha can be related to the new politics of memory and of the past, that have emerged since the 1970s in response to changing political economies and to powerful critiques from indigenous groups, cultural minorities and nation states. Especially in the context of North America, Australia and New Zealand, the negotiation of relations between settler societies and indigenous groups has led to new approaches to anthropology, museology and curation (Brown 2003; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp et al. 1992, 2006; Kreps 2003; Peers and Brown 2003;). Indigenous people’s challenges to the ‘colonial exhibitionary order’ (Mitchell 1992) have subverted the hierarchical separation between self and other, coloniser and colonised, viewer and viewed, object and subject, opening spaces for new voices and epistemologies in the museum. Against longstanding concerns in the social sciences on the relationship between memory and truth, recent literature has analysed memory as a practice of mediation, with a focus on the cultural means and social institutions

through which the past takes shape, and the interpenetration of collective and individual memory practices (Antze and Lambek 1996). Halbwachs's (1992 [1925]) seminal study on collective memory has been taken further, not only to explore how memory is constructed in a social and political context, but to understand the co-existence of multiple and divergent memories across and within groups (Cole 2001: 24). As Werbner (1998) shows, state practices of memorialisation, their places (schools, museums) and performers (state officials, elites) may intersect and conflict with popular counter memories (subalterns, social movements). In India, groups such as dalits and adivasis are increasingly engaged in the remaking of myths of origins and histories to place their communities at the centre rather than the margins of national history (Ciotti 2006; Rycroft 2006). Recent literature on community and indigenous museums has asserted the positive potential of such experiments to retrieve severed histories, memories and identities. This can be seen as the process of (re)constructing what Connerton (1989) terms a 'collective social memory' or what Nora (1989) describes as a *milieu de memoire*. For Connerton, collective memory is fostered and sustained through ritual performances, commemorative ceremonies and bodily habits which, by way of their repetitive and cyclical character, mark a link with the past (1989: 45). For Nora, a *milieu de memoire* is a site of pure community memory which, like an inhabited landscape, is about *habitus* rather than externalised knowledge. This is opposed to a *lieu de memoire*: museums, memorials and sites of historicised memories born out of modernity as traditional contexts disappear. In their attempts to re-establish contexts of memory, new community museums challenge the idea that modernity is substituting living memories with monuments frozen in time. Instead, they link practices of preservation and memorialisation with the re-activation of traditional ways of life, the recuperation of bodily skills and languages and with struggles over the re-acquisition of ancestral lands (Peers and Brown 2003). As such, the

knowledge and histories they generate are not simply of the past, but have the potential to become tools for social action and to destabilise canons, norms and definitions imposed by the state—of national history and development, for instance (Blackburn 2003; Crane 2000; Karp et al. 1992; Tonkin 1992).

These new ways of thinking have generated new methodologies. Museum and material culture studies have particularly discussed the role of things, both as mediators of memory (Parkin 1999) and human agency (Appadurai 1986), and as agents with the capacity to affect social relations (Gell 1998). The landscape has also been re-evaluated as a living entity instead of a surface upon which people dwell (Tilley 2006). Basso (1988) discusses the importance of ancestral place names, thoughts and narratives and their capacity to situate the person who speaks and traverses them in historical and ancestral time. They are ‘spatial anchors’ (ibid.: 121) and ‘vehicles for ancestral authority’, and speaking them is also a way of bringing ancestral wisdom to bear upon the present. Museum curators, anthropologists and historians have increasingly been using techniques of ‘elicitation’ by bringing photographs and old collections to communities and using them as props for memory and tools to reconstruct severed histories (Blackburn 2003; Peers and Brown 2006). During the project I describe in this article, the Koraj hill became itself a site for memory practices and interventions.

With notable exceptions (e.g. Karp et al. 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), literature on community and indigenous museums has had a tendency to be celebratory and presume that efforts at recuperation are empowering. The implicit assumption has been that identities and histories are somewhere out there, buried in traumatic pasts, and that museums provide people with tools for their recuperation. The focus on the revolutionary potential of the subaltern has often been highlighted at the expense of understanding its internal dynamics—



of class, gender, age—and the political and economic contexts with which efforts at recuperation contend. The central theme of ‘retrieving memory’ has also foreclosed serious considerations of the processes, practices and consequences of forgetting.

As Sahlins argues, the stigma and cultural ‘humiliation’ that accompanied historical processes of dispossession played a key role in producing rupture within processes of cultural reproduction, creating a will for change (1992: 24). This theme has been more broadly discussed in relation to ‘modernity’ and the attempt by marginalised communities to shed their essentialised identities while forging new ones through practices of education (Ciotti 2006), consumption (Osella and Osella 2000) and religious reform (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007). Studies of fundamentalist movements of religious conversion have, for instance, shown how embracing a new faith may be seen as necessitating a marked separation and ‘rupture’ with the past. Littlewood (2009) usefully suggests that ‘neglect’ is an initial step in forgetting the old ways towards a new identity. This involves the departure from certain modes of comportment or material evidence that may recall the past and the production of a new habitus. In this respect, anthropologists’ and curators’ concern with memory, and related techniques of elicitation, may become problematic. The ethical and political implications of retrieving culture are particularly evident in relation to historical situations of conflict, where old photographs and narratives may re-open old feuds (Blackburn 2003). In context of reform such as the one I describe, where people are intentionally seeking a distance from the past, not all may want to reverse their so-called silence. Non-remembering also raises the issue of whether people have anything at all to share and to what extent memory related to the past is more of an imposition of the researcher. More broadly, as I will show, people’s accounts of the past are often public projections informed by social canons and norms, the social positioning of the interlocutor as well as ideas and aspirations towards the future. Especially

in contexts in which the social grounds for memory have ceased to exist, remembering might be more about re-remembering.

## II

### *Remembering the past*

The museum Vaacha is a building with open walls, an architectural choice to reflect the permeable boundaries with its surrounding communities. Exhibits are organised around an internal open-air patio. Permanent displays include a collection of traditional household and agricultural equipment that, while still in use in more ‘interior’ villages, are increasingly out of use in villages around the institution. These were all donated and acquired from curators’ families. There are then local art/ritual forms and a large collection of musical instruments from different adivasi communities across the state, alongside a digital repository of original recording. Objects are displayed on rudimentary stands made of locally available materials such as cow dung, bricks and mud and inside the more traditional glass cases. Counter-intuitively, the first aesthetic choice was largely dictated by the taste of outsiders keen to preserve local traditions, while curators mostly preferred standard display cases. In normal days, visitors are sparse: a farmer walking by, a family from the nearby town, some art historian from the city. On festivals, conferences or exhibitions, the museum becomes a more vibrant community space where artists are invited to build, perform and play in the workshop space and visitors converge from local and international places.

The discovery of rock paintings on Koraj was among the determining factors for locating the Museum of Voice near the hill site. During the initial years of the project, some historians and archaeologists had taken interest in the hill and produced a report focussing on these paintings, which they dated as far back as 2000 B.C. Koraj became a renewed focus of research when I joined the institution in 2008 for my doctoral fieldwork. The curators were

looking to take up a research project that would strengthen the museum's relations with the surrounding communities and further its role as a knowledge repository. I was keen to collaborate with the institution, as a way to simultaneously understand its dynamics and contribute to its working.

We aimed at documenting the layered narratives of the landscape, the names of places and the memories of the different communities and generations inhabiting the site. Different methodologies of data collection included photography, filming, mapping and interviews with residents, who acted as guides around the site. The curators' insider position brought great advantages to the process of documentation while pointing to the limits of the 'tribal point of view'. All of them came from villages adjoining the hill and from an educated elite within the dominant Rathva community. As such, they selected most interviewees from this same group while excluding the voices of 'lower' tribes and castes, with the exception of a few people considered 'knowledgeable'. The curators led interviews and tailored questions in a language that was appropriate to local residents. My initially uninformed and 'inappropriate' questions helped to break the boundaries of social normality, bringing laughter as well as silences, as it became clear that certain people, places and topics should remain unexplored. In this respect, while indigenous curatorship successfully addressed a set of power relations (Conaty 2003), it also gave rise to other internal tensions.<sup>3</sup>

During the research process, different epistemologies emerged and conflicted. In collaboration with local residents, but also in relation to historians' previous insights, the museum identified a series of sites on which to base interviews. These included: rock paintings, remains of a fortifying wall, an ancient temple, a *dargah* (Muslim shrine) and

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<sup>3</sup>See Cook and Kothari (2001) and Lewis and Mosse (2006) for similar critiques of participation in the context of development.

various sites of worship dedicated to gods, goddesses and ancestors. While the elders could talk about particular religious locations, they knew little about rock paintings and ancient fortifications. Their answers were limited to vague statements that placed these things in a past beyond memory. Younger generations knew little about both. As a consequence, we were forced to broaden our site specific questions to more open-ended ones, such as: 'how was the village before?' The past became an arena to project diverging ideas of the future. Memories were relational and changed with the social, economic and political position of the listener.

Maheshbhai, the cook at the museum, became our privileged informant for tours around the hill. His parents, Mangliben and Parsingkaka, were among the eldest in the village and contributed to the project with rich narratives about the past. Maheshbhai came from the same Rathva community as the curators. He was, however, from a poorer background and had not gained any formal education. His father owned some land, which had now been divided among his sons, leaving a meagre hectare to each. Their village was located in a relatively fertile area in comparison with the hillier and more rugged terrain that characterises villages a few kilometres away at the border with Madhya Pradesh. The settlement near the hill where they belonged, however, displayed similarities with these areas of the interior. The slightly elevated ground cut their fields off from the irrigation promised by large-scale hydroelectric projects (Baviskar 1996; Lobo and Kumar 2009). The productivity of the land had worsened with the use of fertilisers. As fields failed to provide for expanding families, many relied on labour migration to the cities or other agricultural areas of the state.

Studies conducted since the 1980s agree on an increasing incidence of labour migration among adivasis in western India, with some surveys calculating that on average, half of the adult population migrates for five months each year (Bremar 1996; Mosse et al.

2002, 2005). This has to do with a generalised decline of agriculture, the fragmentation of land and the growth of rural non-farm employment as the mainstay of the agrarian economy (Gupta 2010; Shah and Harriss-White 2011). It has also to do with forms of impoverishment specific to adivasi areas, which relate to these groups' exclusion from traditional sources of livelihood such as the forest and to historically rooted forms of dispossession. While cyclical patterns of rural to rural and rural to urban migration have been reported across the country, certain areas and certain groups—such as the adivasis—tend to act as reservoirs for cheap labour, while others attract it. Maheshbhai had worked for many years as a labourer in the factories of peanut oil in Saurashtra, central Gujarat, while his wife worked on construction sites. After marriage, they had both returned to the village and were struggling to sustain local livelihoods. Maheshbhai had found employment as a cook in the museum. In the evenings, he worked as a tailor and in the fields during the crop season. Working as labourer would have paid better but, as he put it, 'we improved'. The capacity to avoid labour distinguished elite or aspiring elite adivasis from other members of the community and was a marker of improved status. Despite these efforts, many in their family continued to migrate seasonally or semi-permanently, returning to the village for one or two months each year.

Paralleling patterns of remembrance that we found in subsequent interviews and that have been documented in other parts of rural India (Gold and Gujar 1997), Parsingkaka and Mangliben narrated of a past of plenty:

Before the forest was thick and the settlements were few. There were no government officials, and no borders, and people could cultivate wherever they wanted. While fields were small, produce was plenty. People lived on staples of maize and rice, pulses and a rich variety of greens collected from the forest. There were also grains

that had fallen out of circulation and now had a place only in the Museum. The food was tasty and wholesome and kept people in good health.

Parsingkaka and Mangliben then traced a negative shift towards a contemporary situation of scarcity. Their forefathers narrated how ‘the survey’ had come and marked boundaries for each field and village. Boundaries of land also linked to boundaries of identity and they themselves remembered how from being Kolis (a group that today falls under the governmental category of Other Backward Castes or OBCs), they were reclassified as Rathva (a ST group). Land was divided between ‘revenue’ and ‘forest land’. The first was set aside for private (taxable) cultivation. The latter became property of the forest department, thus becoming inaccessible to adivasis. With population growth and as people could no longer access new land, fields became increasingly small. They also became less productive and the food less nourishing. While new vegetables such as eggplants and potatoes were today available alongside an array of market products from tea to oil, elders complained that there was no more ‘fun’ in eating because the increased use of fertiliser had compromised the taste and nutritional qualities of food and water. Besides, traditional ritual foods such as meat and alcohol had become too expensive and hard to get. Though alcohol is illegal in modern day Gujarat, there were fewer trees out of which traditional brews were distilled. People’s widespread adherence to new movements of reform was also altering consumption patterns towards vegetarianism and teetotalism.

Parsingkaka and Mangliben also complained of a loss of moral plenitude and community cohesion and accused younger generations of having forgotten about the gods. The village god was among the sites of worship that the museum was interested in documenting. This is a complex of clay horses and wooden posts located at the border of the village, half way up the Koraj hill. Like the Pithora paintings that some adivasis in this area

have in their houses, these sites are not representations of the sacred but are in themselves sacred entities, with the power to bring about well-being (Alles 2012; Jain 1984). The god used to be renewed cyclically through the installation of new horses and a collective ceremony that would reinstate the divine presence on the site. Today, however, it was a heap of debris and Parsingkaka was sure it would not be renewed. As people joined movements of reform, they were dissociating themselves from the care of this site and the few elders who still worshipped it could not have afforded ceremonial expenses alone.

The gods were not only being neglected but also incorporated within other traditions and more rigid boundaries of identity. Mangliben remembered how years before, ‘our people used to worship the shrine next to the village god. Now they no longer did’. According to Maheshbhai, the shrine had been destroyed at the time of the recent riots of 2002 by some youngsters of the village and was later re-built by Muslim communities who now claimed it for themselves. An influential Muslim family argued that the tomb was built at the time of Muslim conquests (15/16<sup>th</sup> century) by fighters who led armies to these locations, like similar sites scattered in the hinterland. They remembered how, while adivasis used to worship this shrine, Muslims also worshipped the adjoining village god in the occasion of particular sicknesses such as chickenpox but had now stopped. At the bottom of the hill, at around the same time as the shrine was destroyed, an RSS<sup>4</sup> leader from a nearby village sponsored the building of a new Hindu temple in honour of the monkey god Hanuman. The temple was

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<sup>4</sup> The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or National Volunteer Union is a Hindu grassroots organisation that promotes the ideology of Hindutva or pan-Hindu (cultural, religious, national) unity against Muslim, Christian and other minorities (Baviskar 2005; Froerer 2006). For an extensive analysis of the rise of Hindu Nationalism, see Hansen (1999).

built to incorporate a much older stone carving, which Mangliben used to worship by the name of Baba Harman.

As Gold and Gujar note in their exploration of memory and landscape in rural Rajasthan, people have the capacity to view the past in simultaneously diverging ways and ‘ecological nostalgia’ may be juxtaposed to memories of exploitation with no contradiction (1997: 71). Parsingkaka and Mangliben also narrated of the past as a time of scarcity, with memories of famines and forced labour under the princely ruler of Chhota Udaipur. It was the first image of a past of plenty, however, that they promoted in front of the young curators and in relation to a present context of change that they experienced as loss. This was also a context in which complex relations of syncretism and interdependence were being reframed as majority–minority relations, with some communities asserting their power and traditions over others (Hayden 2002; Shaw and Stewart 1994).

### III

#### *Becoming reformed: Forgetting as social separation*

While the museum was engaged in retrieving and re-evaluating adivasis’ past, adivasis around the institution were embracing the reformed identity of *bhagat* and engaged in processes of social transformation and separation from their traditions. Bhagat is a term commonly associated with an emphasis on the practice of ‘devotionalism’ and a general rejection of caste and Brahminical society (Desai 2010). This made bhagat movements historically appealing for the lower castes and classes (Dube 1993; Pocock 1973: 103). It is also a term of current use in the Gujarati language to denote people who are ‘pure’ and knowledgeable. In the context of my research, it was mostly employed to differentiate between those who had given up drinking alcohol and eating meat, often joining a Hindu



sect,<sup>5</sup> and those who had not (Alles 2012: 633). This divide was the strongest mode of social differentiation in the area, which cut across as well as reconfigured distinctions of class, caste and tribe.

### **Old and new movements**

Although Parsingkaka and Mangliben complained about the present context of reform, they had themselves turned bhagat many years before, at the ‘time when the mother goddess came’. The goddess had travelled through the area, embodied in the figure of a young woman. When she reached their village, Parsingkaka and Mangliben had brought all the households’ cooking vessels to the village border together with the rest of the community. Breaking a coconut at the goddess’s feet, they had promised to abjure alcohol and meat. That year, despite a scarce monsoon, the crops had given plenty. This movement is possibly the same that Hardiman (1987) describes for the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which, while concentrated in south Gujarat, also spread to the eastern border.<sup>6</sup> Cyclical movements of reform, however, had swept the area over the years. After some time, Parsingkaka and Mangliben had gone back to their old traditions.

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<sup>5</sup> The terms *panth* (path), *sampradaya* (tradition transmitted from a teacher to a pupil) and ‘sect’ (Shah 2006: 210) have been the focus of longstanding debates among scholars of South Asia. While some have privileged the first (McLeod 1978), rejecting ‘sect’ for its Western bias, others adopted the latter, proposing a differentiation between ‘sect’ and ‘non-sect’ in terms of the greater focus on exclusivity and endogamous relations of the first (Shah 2006). In the context of my research, these terms were used interchangeably with a preference for the word *panth*. Here, for the ease of readership, I will mostly employ the term ‘sect’.

<sup>6</sup> See also Fuchs (1965) and Lal (1997) for studies of reform movements in the region.

The curators and the inhabitants of the area agreed that the contemporary wave of reform was wider in scope than the previous one. Differently from older movements, this transformation was mostly directed towards the widespread array of sects that were increasingly making their inroads in the area.<sup>7</sup> Maheshbhai had joined the Sat Kaival sect 15 years earlier, along with a large section of the village. The sect had been popularised by a local politician, whose daughter had married into the guru's family. This time, Parsingkaka and Mangliben had not joined the reform.

Sects are linked to other religious and political agencies such as the RSS and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) (World Hindu Council), as well as influential individuals and politicians. These offer patronage for religious ceremonies and to individual gurus, while sharing a common understanding of adivasis' place within Hindu/India's history. As various gurus explained, adivasi culture relates to Hinduism as a finger of the same hand—what van der Veer terms the 'inclusivist syncretism of Hinduism' (1994: 9). At the same time, adivasis were re-named vanvasi (people of the forest) and portrayed as having not yet come into the light, or as having degenerated from some pristine condition. As 'fallen Hindus', they had to be re-incorporated. Re-incorporation called for an internal movement of devotion away from sin and a change of behaviour and lifestyle towards new standards of decency, purity and cleanliness. Some sects accompanied their proselytisation with 'development' and had built a few hospitals, mobile clinics and schools in the area. More often, however, their work was directed towards the promotion of new religious gatherings, festivals, pilgrimage routes and temple worship. This involved the re-writing of history and the incorporation of adivasis'

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<sup>7</sup>There were old groups active in the area such as the Kabir Panth and new ones ranging from Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan (BAPS), Morai Bapu, Sat Kaival, the Gayatri Parivar, Ramdev Pir and many more.

local practices and gods into a pan-Indian Hinduism.<sup>8</sup> There were large temple complexes such as the BAPS temple that opened in 2011 in the nearby town of Bodeli<sup>9</sup> as well as smaller shrines being set up in every village, mostly devoted to Lord Hanuman (Lobo 2002). Like the one I described on Koraj, these often encompassed older worship sites made of simple stones or carvings leading to a quite literal saffronisation of the landscape—saffron being the colour of the Hindu nation with which many such temples were painted.

The impetus for change behind these movements has been historically analysed as a response to processes of exploitation and dispossession. At one level, bhagat movements have been explained as movements of ‘sanskritisation’. This is the process by which so called lower tribes and castes have set aside their ways of life (rituals, customs, language) to imitate the traditions of so called superior castes (Charsley 1998; Shah 2011; Srinivas 1956). Along similar lines, some have talked of Hinduisation or Hindutvisation, weaving a close correlation between the working of sects, enrolment within political Hinduism and adivasis’ participation in projects of exclusion. The village of Tejgadh, adjoining the Koraj hill, was the first adivasi village in the region where a Muslim shop was set on fire as riots swept Gujarat in 2002 (Devy 2006: 42). As I showed earlier, it was during this time that a group of young adivasis also destroyed the (Muslim) shrine on the hill. Although communal riots have been a recurrent feature of the history of the region, the anti-Muslim riots of 2002 where more than 2000 Muslims were killed (Baviskar 2005) have been discussed for the unprecedented involvement of adivasis and their concentrated attack on Muslims. These have generally been

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<sup>8</sup> On a larger scale, the choice to locate the largest Hindu religious gathering—the *Kumbh mela*—in the adivasi district of Dangs can be seen as part of this work (Lobo 2002; PUCL 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://www.swaminarayan.org/news/2011/03/bodeli/index.htm>. Accessed on 7 May 2013.

explained in terms of adivasis' quest for power and social, economic and political mobility (Baviskar 2005), and as a process of co-option on behalf of the Hindu right (Lobo 2002).

In contrast to these explanations, subaltern scholars have focussed on the agency of the adivasi and/or the peasant (Chaturvedi 2007; Hardiman 1987). In his seminal study of the Devi movement in south Gujarat, Hardiman looks at abstention from alcohol not in terms of a search for purity, but as addressing the fulcrum of adivasis' exploitation at the time. In his analysis, becoming bhagat was a 'powerful tool of Adivasi assertion' as by adopting Hindu dominant values, adivasis implicitly redefined them (Hardiman 1987: 64–65).

Both theories, of 'sanskritisation' and 'adivasi assertion', while offering some truths are limited in their understanding of agency as stemming from external and internal forces respectively. While Hindutva is emerging as a visible presence in the area, inscribing itself in the physicality of the landscape, its effects are less 'deep' and far reaching than they have been portrayed. Adivasis' embracing of bhagat identities also cannot be analysed as a coherent programme of peasant assertion (Shah 2011). When I asked Maheshbhai why he had turned bhagat, he explained the transformation as a move away from sin, comparing the body to a sacred space, which should be kept clean of rubbish such as alcohol and meat. Here he differentiated between the old times, when drinking traditional brews was good for the body; and contemporary drinking practices, which were leading to excessive expenses, fights in villages and premature deaths. At another level, he explained this change in relation to external markers of recognition: 'before we used to drink, dance and play the drum, now we have stopped, we have become bhagat.' This transformation offered a practical response to the recurrent problem of fights in villages, as well as economic betterment and general wellbeing. Changing status towards becoming Hindu did not constitute a central concern (see Desai 2010 for a similar argument). As Shah (2011) suggests, looking beyond the binaries of

‘sanskritisation’ and ‘assertion’ while focusing on differentiated practices of reform and consumption might allow for a better understanding of adivasis’ internal politics and the new aspirations for change and modernity within these communities.

### **Forgetting as social separation**

Littlewood asks what happens when a society ‘seeks actively to dispense with some current set of technical acts and sentiments’ (2009: 113), inquiring into the processes by which ‘practices and ideas, once taken for granted on a daily basis, can now be forgotten as a motivated act’ (ibid.:127). He argues that ‘practical neglect’ (ibid.:116) is the necessary first stage to forget devalued practices and thought—this may involve the active neglect of material signs, forms of comportment and habitus. Utopian and millenarian communities, in order to create a new future, often seek a different physical site as an obvious blank slate on which to inscribe their new vision and as a marked shift away. Where this is not possible, however, as in the case I describe here, material signs are deployed within this transformation and erased, so that no traces of the past may be left. Drawing from Bourdieu, Littlewood further argues that as the erasure of previous practices can be difficult and inadequate, such processes are most successful when coupled with some other practical habitus: ‘social practices that enable or disable certain kinds of memories’ (ibid.: 115). The shift towards bhagat traditions involved a similar process of neglect as well as the forging of a new habitus and sociality through affiliation with new religious sects.

As Parsingkaka lamented, old gods were being neglected alongside traditional festivals and modes of sociality. The village god of Koraj was today a heap of debris that the museum was ready to document but nobody in the village seemed ready to renew. Becoming bhagat also involved a process of separation from other people, including one’s kin, through

the refusal of commensality and marriage with the non-reformed. This was physically marked through the construction of separate kitchens and partitioning walls within the same household, creating new layers of exclusion within the family and the community. The distinction between reformed and non-reformed, however, also intersected with existing trends towards land fragmentation relating to restrictions of forest use, population pressure and the new aspiration of extended families to split into smaller units. More individualised forms of income accrual, through labour migration, for instance, were also altering the communalities of households. In this respect, while religious affiliation to an extent caused social distinction, pre-existing divisions also became apparent through religious reform.<sup>10</sup>

New gods, festivals, ideas of 'fun' and aesthetics were at the same time being popularised. Gurus were substituting traditional priests as figures of authority and temple worship was replacing the worship of older and open air shrines. Religious festivals no longer called for animal sacrifice and the ritual partaking of meat and alcohol, but featured fried foods and sweets. Belonging to a sect was marked by variously shaped marks on the forehead and bead necklaces around the neck. More generally, it involved 'dressing up' the naked body and adhering to new standards of decency, cleanliness and respectability. Finally, becoming bhagat offered adivasis the opportunity to be part of something larger and more far reaching than their traditions, opening connections towards the 'outside'. Most of the sects at work in the area came from elsewhere and devotees made it a point to visit their original temple at least once in a lifetime.

It is important to note how becoming bhagat was often a shift of appearance rather than a 'deep' and 'total' transformation. Old identities remained relevant. Although most sects promised equality, especially outside the sect's purview, ingrained distinctions of tribe

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<sup>10</sup> See Froerer(2006) for a similar argument in the regional context of Chhattisgarh.

and caste persisted, outliving changes in appearance and comportment (Pocock 1973: 154). As one of the curators explained, 'you can still recognise a Nayak, no matter what dress. You can see it by their way of walking'. New and old traditions mixed. While some actively worked to erase old gods from the house and the landscape, many juxtaposed the two. Posters of new gurus hung over traditional mural paintings such as Pithora, also considered the embodiment of divinities. When the new guru's advice failed, Maheshbhai consulted his older healer and whilst not offering animal sacrifices himself, he might have asked a distant relative to do so on his behalf. Aesthetic traditions also overlapped and the sectarian mark on the forehead coexisted with aspects of 'Tribal fashion' (Alles 2012). Consumption practices continued as a reflection of norms of hospitality. Although Maheshbhai did not eat meat or drink alcohol, he made sure to have some to offer his guests. This highlighted a tension between the despising and praising of these traditions, as well as the lack of moral judgement and discourse of sin. Eating meat and drinking alcohol also continued as public secrets, which were shifted from the realm of public festivals to the interior spaces of the house and the landscape. Visiting 'interior' villages and 'traditional' people such as the artists associated with the museum were occasions to indulge in such practices.

In this sense, 'forgetting' was not really about forgetting but about creating a social separation from a past that should remain visible, in order to remind people where they came from and how they had (positively) changed. Separation led the way to processes of objectification through which traditions came to be located in earlier times and interior places. This could be seen as a process of museumisation that was initiated independently of the museum and that was leading to the identification of a body of 'tradition' that could be contrasted with processes of improvement and 'modernity', while remaining central to its definition (Pigg 1996). With similarities to my argument here, studies of conversion to

Pentacostalism discuss the importance of ‘breaking with the past’, as a separation from ancestral spirits, kin and family (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007). This process is never complete because the past paradoxically takes over a new importance as a dangerous force that continues to haunt a person in the present and that is necessary to sustain the discourses of betterment promoted by the church (Meyer 1998). As such, separation from others necessitates their perpetual otherness to remind the self of one’s transformation. Taking this argument further, becoming bhagat can be seen as a shift of positioning that changed with the location of the speaker. The curators, although being themselves Rathvas, used phrases such as ‘like a Rathva’ or ‘like an adivasi’ to mark a distance from others and, in a sense, from themselves.

#### IV

##### *Re-remembering in the museum*

Various projects of self-transformation co-existed and intersected with the museum’s official aims. Along with a large section of the staff, all the curators had turned bhagat and belonged to different sects. For the curators, this was a taken for granted part of their identity as a young and modern elite—an identity which they juggled with their institutional role as culture keepers. A small portion of the Museum staff, including the then director, belonged to a politically aware elite that was active in campaigns for adivasis’ access to water, forest and land, and believed in the possibility of a utopian society founded on adivasis’ culture.<sup>11</sup> Some did not eat meat or drink alcohol in line with other reformist traditions such as the Gandhian one (Hardiman 2003). Others took part in these activities as a modern elite would, thereby rising above the reformist divide. The only ‘true adivasis’ were perhaps some of the artists

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<sup>11</sup> Among these, some belonged to the Adivasi Ekta Parishad, an adivasi led movement that believes in the long term transformation of adivasi society based on the recuperation of their culture (Tilche 2011).



associated with the museum, who engaged in the eating and drinking practices associated with their ritual and traditional occupations.

In the previous section, I described how the shift towards bhagat practices involved a process of separation from and objectification of the past towards new modes of sociality. The museum engendered similar processes, although the past was here taken as a positive foil for the present and the future. As a member of staff commented, development according to adivasi traditions means ‘going forward by moving backward’. Whilst this discourse in a sense paralleled the elders’ exhortation to ‘live like the old’, the museum employed different registers and epistemologies, as well as processes of selection, inclusion and exclusion.

The museum’s focus on rock paintings and ancient sites was initially a mismatch with the memory of people around the hill, for whom this site was mostly a place related to everyday concerns of livelihood and cultivation. In tune with the representations of other museums, curators talked of adivasi identity and adivasis’ worship sites. In many of the elders’ accounts, however, the identity of adivasi was not a significant reference point. Instead, they talked of ‘our people’, of bhagats and of specific communities such as Rathvas, Nayaks or Kolis. The elders referred to all sites of worship without an adivasi/Hindu/Muslim distinction—distinctions that, as I showed, were however emerging.

In the museum, adivasi religion was talked of as a ‘non-religion’ or ‘natural religion’, in tune with colonial representations of adivasis as animists and with the writings of the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, which were popular in the institution. As a natural religion, it linked to elements of nature, the agricultural cycle and ancestor worship and promoted an alternative to processes of urbanisation, resource exploitation and the increasing destruction of adivasis’ livelihoods. It was a non-religion to the extent that it was free from mediators

such as gurus, the church or the temple. At the same time, processes of re-evaluation supported by the museum, which included patronage to adivasi festivals, pilgrimage routes and sacred sites, were also leading to a rigidifying of this allegedly fluid space that lacked leaders and formal institutions.

In the re-evaluation of adivasi culture, all elements were not considered in an equally positive light. Approaches to the consumption of alcohol, for instance, were ambiguous. On the one hand, traditional brews derived from trees were acknowledged and praised as components of tribal religion, life and diet. They were considered beneficial for their curative and nutritional properties as well as their use in ritual. At the same time, the consumption of alcohol and meat was forbidden in the museum campus and regarded with contempt. Whilst certain kinds of practices and substances were praised as traditional, contemporary forms of drinking were mostly looked down upon. This created a paradox. People like the artists associated with the institution were caught between having to be traditional with their paintings and yet reformed in their comportment, which included controlling behaviours such as drinking.

### **Did we get better or worse?**

Those members of the museum who were politically committed to the recuperation of adivasis' values condemned the increasing inroad of sects, their project of incorporation and the divisions this was bringing about in adivasi society. In their view, the sectarian focus on drinking as the basis of poverty and of evils in adivasi society was a misplaced assumption that sidelined the real roots of poverty: centuries of adivasis' dispossession by outsiders (Padel and Das 2010). To them, participation in the reformed culture promoted by these groups was itself an expensive affair with little reward (Baviskar 2005). Devotion demanded generous 'donations'. Rumours had it that the new BAPS temple in Bodeli was financed with

old silver ornaments taken away from adivasis, amounting to both economic and cultural dispossession. Moreover, poor adivasis were generally unable to move beyond the apparent equality granted to them within the sect into more successful jobs.

For some, the preservation of adivasi culture was also becoming increasingly crucial in a political context in which, due to an old categorical tension between Rathvas and Kolis, certain groups were being threatened with the loss of tribal identity and the material benefits that went with it. The loss of languages, rituals, dress and the vague criteria of ‘backwardness’ listed in the constitution as markers of ST status left no ‘proof’ for substantiating identity claims.

As members of the museum, as bhagats and as a younger and less ideologically driven group, the curators were doubtful in assessing social transformation. The collaborative research we undertook around Koraj became, as a consequence, an occasion for reflections on the past, present and future and for an intergenerational dialogue across the reformist divide. When talking to elders, the curators granted them respect and authority and listened with genuine interest to their stories. Whilst agreeing with Mangliben and Parsingkaka’s portrayal of a past of plenty, they also cherished the abandonment of habits that ‘were not good’. At the end of the interview, one of the curators by way of a personal question asked Parsingkaka: ‘becoming bhagat ... is it a matter of happiness or sadness?’ Parsingkaka replied:

Is anybody happy? This sadness which has started will continue. Has god started this sadness? Men have. Whatever happens by itself, that only is true. If you see something fall, if you die, this is all done by god. All of today’s bhagats are hiding. Then what kind of bhagats are they? God sees in four directions. If you eat meat while

you are being seen, then nobody can call you a thief. But they are all thieves today. Even the true bhagats are sad. If you are a bhagat, you should not get fever or headache [referring to the kind of pain attributed to the work of witches]. But bhagats will say: ‘my legs hurt, my head hurts’. They should live happily, but they are sad. Eat, drink, do whatever you have to do, but don’t do sadness!

The comment was received with a round of laughter. The curator knew well the ‘fake’ bhagats Parsingkaka referred to. Walking back towards the museum, at each step he started agreeing more with Parsingkaka and wondering: ‘If most bhagats are not true, why become bhagat at all, and why hiding?’ In his tone, there was a sense of respect for the elders and their talk of the gods and a sense that they in the museum were doing something important, in giving voice and to these histories.

The transformation of memories from a milieu to a lieu of memory, that is, from an environment and habitus to a place, involved the creation and use of new categories of knowledge. It also engendered important processes of reflexivity as well as contestation and mediation about ‘who we are’ and about the possibility of bringing one’s traditional knowledge to bear upon the future. In this sense, akin to other community museum projects, Vaacha tried to activate adivasi culture rather than have it stand as a monument frozen in time, thereby making the museum something in between a lieu and a milieu of memory. Although the recuperation of the past involved its own process of reform and exclusion, the motivation behind such transformation was rather different to the one given by sects. This was the intentionality to remember and to ‘block the work of forgetting’, rather than the intentionality to forget (Nora 1989: 20).

## V

### *Conclusions*

This article has offered a critical analysis of the processes of retrieving an adivasi past. Recent literature has positively emphasised the potential of new indigenous and community museums to ‘elicit’ and recuperate severed histories, identities and skills as resources for development and social change. Vaacha: the Museum of Voice worked to generate an adivasi knowledge and worldview as the foil for a new utopian society. Despite the celebrated link between museums and memory, however, I have showed how the recuperation of an adivasi past was predicated upon a context of loss and forgetting. Around the museum, there was no adivasi identity. Contemporary social life in the area was instead characterised by a series of fragmentations in terms of tribal, religious and political affiliations, economic disparities and diverse aspirations for the future. People were moving away from their traditions while embracing new reformed identities and the ‘traditional adivasi’ had become a mirage, always located beyond the speakers’ horizon. At the same time, new and more rigid boundaries of identity were emerging as in the separation between adivasis, Hindus and Muslims.

Collaborative research between the museum, researchers and surrounding communities highlighted multiple layers of mediation and exclusion, as well as different registers and epistemologies. The past emerged as a dialogue between generations, groups and institutions in which people did not have an equal say. Indigenous curatorship, while in some way empowering, also paralleled and heightened existing inequalities. While young Rathva adivasis worked as curators and researchers, their voice silenced other communities considered ‘lower’ and more ignorant. Curators had certain ideas of what an adivasi past should be made of—ideas which they derived from the representations of other museums and

the presence of researchers such as myself. These were initially a mismatch with the memories (and the lack of memories) of people outside the museum. Elders' narratives, while referring to the past, aimed to direct the youth to a different future and to resist the present context of reform.

Instead of looking for a 'true' adivasi past, this article examined the transformation towards the reformed identity of bhagat as one of the most significant social distinctions in the area, which affected and intersected with the process of recovery initiated by the museum. The push for reform has its roots in historical processes of dispossession and humiliation, and the creation of the adivasi as a negative cultural identity. Old bhagat movements intersected with new ones, which were mostly directed towards affiliation with emerging religious sects. The values these promoted also related to other development, educational, political and religious agencies at work in the area. The bhagat transformation, however, could not be reduced to a process of Hinduisation or to a coherent programme of adivasi assertion. It was often a shift of lifestyle and surface rather than a deep and total transformation. Following Littlewood (2009), I showed how an important step towards this transformation involved the 'practical neglect' of modes of comportment and material signs associated with being adivasi, as well as the separation from other people. This went together with forging a new habitus and new connections. In some cases, reform can provide access to a pure and idealised 'past'. From the point of view of sects, by becoming reformed, adivasis could go back to their alleged Hindu origins. In the case I describe, however, turning bhagat was mostly about forging affiliations outwards, with an outlook towards the future. People joined sects in relation to the new openings and connections that these associations produced. Finally, reform and separation from others was, in practice, more permeable than it was made to appear. Neglect often did not involve the erasure of previous identities and modes of sociality,

which begs the question of its permanence. Instead, these were pushed to a separate realm of tradition and interiority, of the house and the landscape.

The museum, with all its contradictions, proposed a competing vision of modernity to the one of sects, grounded on a positive re-evaluation of adivasi identity. It also sought to offer a more sustainable avenue to social and economic mobility, with a focus on recovery and integration rather than forgetting and separation. While reform movement led to an objectification and interiorisation of certain modes of comportment and traditions, the museum worked to bring these to the public realm. As I showed, these two ideologically distinct projects also displayed significant overlaps, as processes of re-evaluation in the museum also involved an aspect of transformation and reform.

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